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ABSTRACT

This working paper is intended to enrich an initial description of alternative businesses and A-Way Express Couriers, in particular. (A-Way, a 12-year-old community organization, is a psychiatric survivor-run alternative business.) The paper begins with a brief commentary on the psychiatric survivor movement and research on it. The paper traces the emergence and entrenchment of learning as a key feature of psychiatric survivor-run or alternative businesses. The methodology used is to re-read previous research projects and results through the lens of informal learning. Early research on psychiatric survivor-run businesses is reviewed in view of a definition of social learning with these three dimensions: solidarity learning, reshaping the definition of self, and organizational learning. A more detailed examination of informal learning processes at A-Way builds on a previously generated profile and is organized according to the three dimensions of social learning. Comments are based on face-to-face interviews with five employees from each of these three groupings within A-Way: couriers on commission, part-time office staff on salaries, and full-time management on salaries. The final section constructs a narrative account of one woman's learning at A-Way--how over nine years she moved from courier to executive director of the business on a journey that evokes the richness and complexity of informal learning in this context. (YLB)

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NALL Working Paper #20-2001

Learning To Walk Between Worlds
Informal learning in psychiatric survivor-run businesses: A retrospective re-reading of research process and results from 1993-1999

A working paper prepared for the
Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning by
Kathryn Church PhD

February 2001

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INTRODUCTION

This document is one of several working papers arising from a research team (Shragge, Ng, Church and Fontan) within the Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL). Our first joint monograph was entitled "Social learning among people who are excluded from the labour market: Part one: Context and case studies." It laid down some essential groundwork for discussion including initial descriptions of three community organizations. We situated their practices in the context of structural changes in the nature of work and the restructuring of the welfare state. One of the community organizations was a psychiatric survivor-run "alternative" business called A-Way Express Couriers, a 12 year old business located in Toronto.

"Learning to Walk between Worlds" is intended to enrich our team's initial description of alternative businesses, and A-Way Express in particular. It begins with a brief commentary on my location with respect to the psychiatric survivor movement, and the informal learning I have done as a researcher that enables me to do this writing. I then trace the emergence and entrenchment of learning as a key feature of psychiatric survivor-run or "alternative" businesses. This is followed by a description of how learning takes place at A-Way Express. My method in these sections is to re-read previous research projects and results through the lense of "informal learning," supplemented with new interviews where necessary. I conclude with a narrative telling of "one woman's story," the learning done by one psychiatric survivor over nine years in a survivor business.

RESEARCHER AS INFORMAL LEARNER

My knowledge of psychiatric survivor businesses and other forms of survivor social/political struggle is collective knowledge. It became possible because people who are "insiders" to psychiatric oppression collaborated with me as an "outsider" to that experience (Narayan, 1988). Learning how to do that took a long time – on both sides. It was difficult. There were breakdowns in the process between us and the context that surrounded us: places where pivotal relationships ended and others began, where focal issues suddenly shifted or were displaced, where major breakthroughs gave way to stubborn dead ends. Nothing in my formal training prepared me for the actual dynamic of doing and sustaining this work and myself in it over a long period of time. I had to learn that on my own, informally, and in that process psychiatric survivors were often my teachers.

Looking back, it strikes me that their "re/training" of me consisted of two essential lessons. The first was to accept as legitimate the experiential nature of survivor knowledge, including its often-emotional (supposedly non-rational) testimonial form. And I mean this at both the interpersonal and systemic levels. The second was to relate to psychiatric survivors from a subjective position of personal engagement rather than objective distance. The latter was much more complex, coming as it did during a period of intense professional development from which I consequently felt an uncomfortable distance (Rose and Black, 1985). I will admit to only some of the learning strategies that I evolved to accomplish this shift. The most pervasive was simply hanging out with psychiatric survivors after meetings, gossiping in smoky bars over drinks and unwanted carbohydrates.

On these occasions, there was a rich exchange of life stories (including tales that were not typically

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shared in public) and a sometimes ribald dissection of personalities from the mental health community, (part of which was a verbal mapping of new or potential allies). There were intense political debates on a variety of topics: mental health advocacy, events at Queen's Park, gay/lesbian sexuality and other aspects of life in the big city. These sessions were impromptu, unstructured, sometimes loud and often full of laughter. At first, I didn't get the joke but gradually I caught onto the survivor sense of humor and survivor culture in general. I remember long exchanges between one survivor leader whose worldview I did understand and another whose worldview was opaque to me. By watching and listening to him interact with her, I learned how to communicate across our differences – not perfectly, but well enough that we became people rather than categories to each other. The passionate, slightly foul-mouthed, anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian persona that I acquired in the process went strongly against the grain of my formal training (and my family background) but it facilitated collaboration.

Predictably, one of my conclusions was that the work of creating "partnerships" across differences in the mental health system cannot be done solely within formal settings, roles and relationships. "I haven't forgotten," I wrote several years ago, "that an important part of my own work as a national organizer.... was to attend to the deals that were going down in the halls or in the bar or over dinner after formal procedures were through. These are political spaces, political times of day and political practices for professionals, the mysteries of which survivors are only beginning to unravel" (Church 1995: 125). Given the limits of the formal system, I argued that psychiatric survivors and mental health professionals needed to cultivate informal spaces where they could safely talk back to each other, establish some degree of trust and commitment, forge and solidify alliances. Thus, even before I look at my "data," I know that informal learning requires informal (and sometimes unconventional) teaching within socio/political interstices that must be consciously, deliberately constructed.

Since 1983, I have been self-employed as an independent researcher.[1] This arrangement facilitates my continued engagement with the psychiatric survivor community in research and knowledge development on their terms. Together, our focus has been on practices of community economic development (CED). Some of the research I did was formal, for example, a two-year study sponsored by the (then) Toronto CED Network and funded by Health Canada. Some of it was informal done primarily through conversations with psychiatric survivors and observations of survivor-run businesses in the course of my engagement with the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses (OCAB).[2]

Throughout this period, my primary interest has been in the lived experience of participants in these kinds of initiatives. At the time, I was unaware of the literature on informal learning. None of the questions I asked were designed to elicit information about or comment on learning in this context. And yet, to my surprise, learning persistently surfaced as a primary theme and concern. In this essay, I bring this previously submerged material to the fore.

EARLY DISCOVERIES

In our team's first monograph, we suggested a definition of "social learning" that has three dimensions:

- solidarity learning: takes place not according to an explicit curriculum but spontaneously and unpredictably through social interactions that foster people's participation;
- reshaping the definition of self: learning in which participants build new identities; they rethink who they are in relation to society;
- organizational learning: the ways in which community organizations come to understand how to operate and position themselves within an entrepreneurial culture while continuing to carry forward their historical concerns for social and economic justice.

In this section, I review my early research on psychiatric survivor-run businesses along these lines.

Solidarity learning

An organizer and potential employees of Fresh Start Cleaning went to the Mayor's Office to talk directly to him about funding. They made a deputation to the Economic Committee that subsequently approved fifty thousand dollars. In this way, everyone got a chance to actually experience development, to "go

through it." They got to glimpse how the system works and learned that they had allies. On his way out of City Hall, one man declared: "The Mayor's job isn't so hard; even I could do it!"

Done with a mixed group of people living on low incomes, my early research into CED yielded rich descriptions of psychiatric survivors and other people on low incomes building solidarity. The possibilities were expressed at the individual level through what I termed intact storylines. This referred to people whose expectations for CED had basically been met. In addition to earned income, it had delivered other kinds of results.

Participation and decision-making

Participants with intact storylines experienced CED as a process that both required and allowed for their participation with other people in productive activity. This was true of the work, which was often done in teams or groups, and also of business management. In many cases, the governing structures were informal but some businesses had boards or steering committees; others were attempting to operate as small worker cooperatives. People who became engaged with the businesses were drawn not only into jobs but also into decision-making roles through board or committee membership. These were forums in which people who are not viewed as decision-makers struggled collectively with issues facing the businesses, where they took up positions of responsibility in how things were run.

The experience of being depended upon rather than depending on others was novel and important. For some it led to more extensive participation; an employee from one business might be asked to sit on the board for another. Among psychiatric survivors, involvement with a community business was one way of becoming known to the survivor movement more generally. It could lead to organized participation in movement activities such as attending rallies, representing survivors on government committees related to mental health issues, or sitting on the boards of mental health programs. For them, an advantage of doing CED was that they could structure their work to make time for involvement with other social and political commitments. Thus, for most employees with intact storylines, their work was an entry point into broader forms of social participation. It drew them into the world in diverse and nuanced ways.

For example, a woman who had never really worked previous to her involvement with a community business did not like group interaction. Her typical response was to be silent or to walk away. Becoming an employee made big changes in her life. Not only did the business expect her to work with and manage the work of other employees, it expected that she would attend staff and other meetings. When the business with which she was involved went through a prolonged crisis of leadership, she became part of a management team responsible for keeping things going. The situation required considerable inter-personal management at a time when this woman was still in the process of gaining these skills. She found herself dealing with things she had never dealt with before. She met people and visited other businesses; she made presentations to the company board and its committees; she became more vocal. Over time, this woman became significantly more comfortable in groups. She developed the capacity to be part of and give leadership to a team.

Making changes such as these was not easy. Indeed, part of what the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses (OCAB) has learned as an organization is that bringing a group of psychiatric survivors into positive control of a business is an ongoing struggle. Many survivors have limited experience with anything but authoritarian decision-making. When they first begin to make decisions about their businesses, survivors often demonstrate the same authoritarian style that they experienced going through the service system. They make decisions that are not in their best interests. They may set extremely tough rules for behavior or performance only to find out that they are the ones who break them and must endure the consequences. With experience comes moderation but it may take years to establish.

A sense of community

Many participants with intact storylines had no previous work history. Yet, they had put in three to seven years as employees of community businesses. They experienced these work environments as places where they could set down some roots. A big factor in this reversal was clearly the sense of community they derived from participation. Some respondents were explicitly looking for this

experience; others were looking for work and discovered or grew into community as a secondary benefit.

In general, these participants liked the people they worked with and drew support from the social connections in their workplaces. They experienced cooperation, understanding and compassion. They appreciated co-worker feedback on a job well done and were sustained by joking (smoking) and camaraderie. One man wondered aloud where everyone would go if the business he worked in closed down. "It would be like losing a member of the family," he said. Echoing these sentiments, another psychiatric survivor said that she wouldn't give up her job even for one in another survivor business. "If there were no money to pay my salary," she claimed, "I would still be here for this business." This new loyalty and sense of connection were feelings acquired within the business. They had to do with her connection to her co-workers. Although everyone's situation was slightly different, she "recognized" them as fellow survivors.

The importance of community-building was obvious through its absence as well as presence. Some of the people I interviewed embodied what I termed broken storylines. They started out hopeful about their CED involvement, passed through a period of significant disillusionment and left the endeavor feeling sad, discouraged, angry and, sometimes, victimized. There were two primary issues: significant financial problems either at the individual or business levels; and, significant problems establishing and maintaining good relationships with other participants.

Participants with broken storylines experienced their involvement with other people in CED as problematic. The scale of discomfort could be relatively small such as when members of a business lost interest and drifted off into other projects or when absenteeism became a chronic management problem. Or it could be much larger. One man was startled to encounter a group of fellow employees who were unheard by their own membership. Board leadership in confronting issues of employee protection was not strong. This caused him to become disillusioned with people he had previously admired. He felt that his options were to speak up and lose his job, or shut-up and keep it. Following his departure, he looked back on his involvement as his "worst job ever." The most difficult aspect was the loss of innocence he felt upon learning that survivors with a history of powerlessness were not above reproach where power was concerned. Within this particular setting, he perceived people duplicating abuses that had been visited on them by others. The realization preceded his sharp and painful disengagement from CED activity.

Reshaping the definition of self

> *There was a man who worked for Fresh Start. When he started as a cleaner, his social workers were pessimistic about his possibilities for success. The other cleaners grumbled about how slow he was but they spent hours patiently showing him the locations of all the garbage cans at his cleaning site. There were many setbacks and then one day this man arrived at work with something new. He had gone out and purchased his own mop. He had become a worker.*

Whenever I interview survivor employees, they tell me how important it is to work in an environment in which people "understand mental illness." In functional terms, this means that the businesses can accommodate periods of time during which some employees do not feel well enough to work. They feel tremendously supported by the fact that survivor-run businesses are organized for flexible use of time: planned absenteeism, modified hours and best work hours. The same people emphasize how important it is to be treated as people with skills and capacities who are not completely defined by their diagnosis but engaged, along with everyone else, in growth and change. Thus, psychiatric survivor businesses operate in what is hopefully a creative tension between accepting the limitations of their employees and deconstructing them.

People who come into alternative businesses have been psychiatrically diagnosed and treated; many are on pensions that officially constitute them as both disabled and unemployable. But more than that, most have internalized a "mental patient" identity. As OCAB pointed out:

> medical professionals have told psychiatric survivors that they are ill, that they are easily over-stimulated and thus should never be given anything interesting, challenging or

> important to do. They are told to find quiet hobbies to occupy their time. They are not encouraged to think for themselves or to plan for their futures. Instead, their lives are to be orchestrated: personally, socially and economically. (1995)

Beyond (or perhaps within) the day to day tasks of running a business, the challenge for survivor leaders is to use business development to help employees question these kinds of determinations, the limits that have been set for them by other people. The challenge is to help employees question authority, particularly the authority of health and social service systems over their lives. In other words, the work is not simply technical but also political.

Depending heavily on their leadership, some businesses do better with this than others. Their efforts show up in the sense that participants have of themselves and their actions. I want to illustrate this with a segment of dialogue between survivor members of a focus group discussing what it means to be a "successful" business. In this group, there was one dominant male speaker. He was a relative newcomer who took strong positions as both pro-business and pro-medical model. He was challenged by three female speakers, all of whom had been around for much longer and one of whom stated immediately that there had to be a balance between quality of the business and quality of life for the employees. She presented this view consistently until towards the end of the session there was an important exchange between her and the dominant speaker in which their views were clearly polarized.

> X: (with anger) What's mentally ill? Seriously mentally ill? Isn't this what we're trying to fight? Fucking people saying labels. I mean, I worked at your company for five years and…
>
> Y: You can change the language but the people …
>
> X: It ain't about people being mentally ill … man! (frustration)
>
> Y: Yeah, it is. I can't take just anyone and make them a supervisor. Some of these people would never work anywhere else.
>
> X: You could with the right training. You could with the right training. You absolutely can. And if you think you can't, then you shouldn't be in your position.
>
> Y: File a grievance with my board.
>
> X: You're tokenizing people, right? You say some people can only do this. You only expect this much of them.
>
> Y: No, it's not about what I expect. It's not a matter of expectations.
>
> X: It's about expectations. What's it about?
>
> Y: It's a matter of the fact that some people will never be able to fulfill the job description.
>
> X: Not true.

The dynamics of this exchange revolved around issues of control and power. One person attempted to exercise dominance (verbally, conceptually and through body language). He was challenged by those who have come to understand survivor businesses as places where people whose lives are embedded in the mental health system learn to question authority and how it has been exercised in their lives. It was not easy for the challengers. One speaker left the group circle to sit behind a nearby counter; from this safer distance she continued to contribute her remarks. But no one backed down. Not only was "empowerment" a substantive issue raised by this group; it was also enacted by the group. The discussion was an active demonstration of what alternative businesses attempt to accomplish along this dimension.

The political work of the businesses was also reflected in individual lives. One employee I interviewed

got involved with a community business because he suffered from seizures. His first challenge as an employee became meeting, working and socializing with psychiatric survivors. It was a life-altering experience. Through the business this man gained a new understanding of psychiatric survivors. Over time, he ceased to view them as a group marked by particular characteristics and came to know each of his fellow employees as individuals. "These guys were thought of as 'kooks' you know," he told me. "Anyone who would refer to them as a bunch of 'kooks' doesn't know what they are talking about. Most of them were put on the shelf. But to see these people when they get their paychecks, well, it does something to their eyes. It gives them the feeling that they are back in society." This man's sense of connection deepened until he reached a point where he understood that psychiatric survivors were tied down economically in the same ways that he was as someone with a physical health problem. "Even if you want to go forward," he said, "you can't." Sharing their sadness, he included himself with them as people who face external barriers to moving up and outwards.

Another employee used the early years of his business involvement to make major changes in the way he thought about himself. He decided that he was not the "mentally ill" person the institution told him he was. At first he wasn't certain but he was certain enough to refuse medication, then the work itself stabilized him to the point where he came to know his own wellness. A community business gave him a place to make an easy transition to stability at his own pace. He came to understand that bureaucrats and mental health professionals are not "untouchables." He perceived that they didn't have any connections that he could not make himself, that they had no special knowledge or power. He found that he was no longer afraid of them. Exposure to experts through participation on the board of the business demystified them. He felt free to disagree; he was able to speak out and organize on behalf of survivors. This man developed a strong connection to the survivor movement as an employee of a survivor business. He became more politically aware; he wanted to change the system. While he eventually left, the goals that he set for his development remained connected to the growth that he experienced there.

Not everyone made these kinds of identifications. Some employees struggled with the fact that the businesses require people to be "out" as survivors; they felt ghettoized by being part of a highly stigmatized group and a culture that is organized around survivor-hood. For example, a psychiatric survivor whose first steady job was in a survivor-run business described it as a long learning process that was starting to be fun. The work was constructive and he liked interacting with co-workers. "The job is more people than money," he claimed. However, two years later, he had developed an extensive critique of this earlier position – a critique that became possible, ironically, because of the personal gains that he made as an employee.

This man wanted to work full-time and to make a living, to be a taxpayer rather than a recipient. His goal was to make even a little bit of progress in his life; he really wanted to break out of the economic constraints in which he was caught. Restless and unhappy at his old job, he was drawn towards the private sector. His complaints ran deeper than being under-challenged by the work. He wanted the business to be more business-like, for example, by creating an investment strategy. He didn't like the fact that one of its major options was to ask for more money from government. Over time, his concerns shifted from the social to the economic side of business operation. He wanted to see psychiatric survivors move away from mental health self-help and into finances, to make economic progress in the way that they had made social or community progress. He handled this tension in his own life through becoming employed in a survivor-run business that gave him better access to contact with the general public.

Organizational Learning

There is a marked difference between how community economic development is constructed in writing and how it is lived. The literature on CED portrays it as a "relatively bump-free story" (Fine; 1995). On paper, it is "a comprehensive, multi-faceted strategy" for revitalizing communities involving resource development and mobilization, democratic organizational development, and the management of expanded socio-economic tools (Fontan,1993: 9). The realities that I encountered on the ground were much less rational and orderly.

Local meltdowns

Among low income and labeled groups, CED was an unsettling process -- one in which the rhythms and relationships of daily life were continually disrupted. A key informant used the word "meltdown" to refer to predictable problems and events that interfered with the (hoped for) pattern of steady forward progress. Dealing with organizational crisis was something that all participants were learning to do.

Take Fresh Start, for example. A survivor-run cleaning company, it was just five years old when I studied it. The business's initial development was rapid and relatively unstructured around such basic requirements as unemployment benefits, Canada Pension Plan, personnel and operational policies. Its first paid staff -- co-directors –incorporated the business and formed a board of directors comprised of four survivor "insiders" and four "outsiders." Early in its term, problems arose with the co-directorship. Within a matter of months, both directors quit, the board disintegrated and the original organizers were left to start over. The crisis pitted friend against friend. Upon reflection, organizers recognized that their inexperience with personnel matters contributed significantly to the staffing failure. "We were all just learning," said one. "The situation taught us the importance of creating tight solid job descriptions."

Other CED initiatives demonstrated similar trial and error learning. One participant described the business he was involved with as something that "unfolded like a pot of spaghetti falling on the floor." It wasn't planned and intentional. It just evolved little by little as participants looked at their choices and made decisions. Participants in another business tried for a couple of years to create a simple but fair payment system that valued worker autonomy. At the same time they were unincorporated, had no by-laws, mission statement or long-term plan. In the end, they felt strongly that not enough time went into planning.

This kind of struggle took its toll on participants. I remember a women who described her work as frustrating and highly stressful. But she loved her job and claimed that she wouldn't give it up even for employment in another survivor business. Two years and many organizational crises later, this woman felt too exhausted to work and had no idea how she was going to recover herself. She had reached a point where she thought about leaving the business but didn't feel that she could manage elsewhere. She didn't have the confidence to go through a job interview or the experience to go to another job. The money she earned and the outcomes she experienced in her current situation were too good for her to leave. Although this was the best work situation she had ever had, she was in some senses "trapped" in the business.

Stories such as this troubled my early CED investigation. Was 'meltdown' really an essential feature of business development on the margins? Some people I interviewed believed it was inevitable; they argued that good organizers used crisis to bring participants together. Other people countered that the 'normal' struggles of business development become crises when the community involved had not been inadequately developed. The risk of doing business was that participants forgot to build community. And that was the other question: were organizational structures inherently disabling? All of the businesses I examined created structures that were intended to help them operate. But getting organized to do business clearly had an impact on the social and community development that these initiatives also attempted to foster. The technicalities of business development tended to stifle grassroots participation. Getting things done right and learning to do by doing were both important to survivor businesses. Finding a good balance between the two wasn't easy.

Some businesses failed on this very ground; others found ways of coping with or transforming their organizational dilemmas. Returning to Fresh Start for a minute, its post-crisis executive director had a clear vision of the business as psychiatric survivor-run. She took on the task of rebuilding the board as an opportunity for employees to take control and develop ownership. They were heavily involved in advertising for and subsequently interviewing prospective board members. The process helped them understand what board members do and to select people who had the skills they needed. This second attempt at a board was successful. Fresh Start's organizers drew particular conclusions from these and other developmental experiences. They argued that there was no way to avoid the intensity of beginning such a project. Mistakes got made but these were simply part of the process. Crises would come; the important thing was to learn from them, to simply "get through."

What I learned from these and other case examples was that the work of developing alternative economic communities is often a heartbreaking struggle. Why did people do it? Obviously, some participants had

no other avenues for economic participation, no other ways to sustain themselves. But, as political economic theorists Bowles and Gintis argue, "individuals and groups … act not merely to get but to become" (1987: 22). While "getting" through CED is often problematic, survivor run businesses give their participants much-needed scope for "becoming." (Some) people who are excluded from the mainstream economy were given a chance to become productive. Some of these attempts were futile or painful; others were funny or brilliantly adaptive. In each case, the bittersweet learning was valued.

Failing forward

As the umbrella organization for survivor businesses across Ontario, OCAB was consistently concerned with what people actually did in the course of "economic development," where their efforts failed, where they succeeded and what was learned from the process regardless of outcome. Over time, the organization itself learned the fundamental importance of documenting the knowledge that psychiatric survivors generated through their actions, both to "re/member" it for their own members and to pass it along to others. Especially for its leaders, the "business" of economic development went well beyond job creation and training to include a complex layering of community and knowledge development.

An early position paper (1995) articulated OCAB's challenge to the de-legitimated place that survivors hold in society. It linked the political analysis of the survivor movement to the emergent practice of alternative business.

> [The Council] does not believe that survivors are lazy or 'unmotivated.' We cannot accept that they are offered drugs instead of real opportunities. We are committed to raising survivor expectations for their lives. We are committed to making them the key decision-makers in their own lives. Thus, the Council supports the development of alternatives to the medical or clinical model that currently dominates mental health care and treatment. We want alternatives that do not lock survivor perceptions into what is wrong with them, alternatives that enable them to create themselves as more than 'illness.' The Council is not interested in what psychiatric survivors cannot do. We are interested in what they can do. And we believe that all psychiatric survivors can do some form of useful paid work. (OCAB, 1995: 5-6)

Two years and much discussion later, a second document proposed ten guidelines for building survivor communities through economic development. At their core was the emphasis on survivor control not only through affirmative hiring and board membership but also through peer training. It made on-the-job, non-credentialed learning central to the practice of survivor CED.

> Psychiatric survivors involved in economic development like the fact that it gives them a chance to learn, to acquire new skills, extend their interests and build their capacities. A great way to foster CED-related learning is to encourage participants not to be bound by expert advice, but instead, to learn by doing. Simply begin the work that needs to be done, risk making mistakes, learn from them and move on. In other words fail forward! (Church, 1997)

Both documents were (and remain) key resources for OCAB. They acted as a touchstone for survivors engaged in economic development and as a wedge to open up other arenas and debates. The leadership circulated them generously to its key publics: psychiatric survivors, mainstream CED practitioners, mental health professionals, bureaucrats, politicians, academics and students. They used them to inform but also to create legitimacy and political support for their efforts. The practice of "working a document," too, was learned by doing, through trying and failing forward. It led, in 1998, to OCAB's incorporation of the In Your Face Learning Academy, the objects of which are: to provide leadership training to consumers/survivors of the mental health system; to conduct research and do documentation that reflects the consumer/survivor perspective; to conduct public education related to consumer/survivor issues, and; to become a resource center with a curriculum for consumer/survivors. Still in the early stages of development, the Academy both reflects what OCAB has learned and represents a cutting edge of its organizational development.

LEARNING AT A-WAY EXPRESS COURIERS

I move now to a more detailed examination of informal learning processes at A-Way Express Couriers in Toronto. This builds on the profile that I generated for this team's first monograph. My comments here are based on face to face interviews conducted in 1999 with five employees from each of three groupings within A-Way: couriers on commission; part-time office staff on salaries; full-time management on salaries.[3]

A place of learning

The fifteen employees I interviewed experienced A-Way Express as a fertile place to learn and develop skills. Most found their feet in the courier position, using it to learn the environment and get comfortable with the people. Management learned about them in the courier role, their skills and interests. Some couriers liked the work so much that they didn't want to do anything else; they didn't seriously contemplate a move. Others were interested in moving to part-time office work. It wasn't unusual for couriers to fill in for other workers who were sick or on holiday and in that way to test out whether they would like and could handle this shift. If a position opened up both parties were then much more certain about whether it would be a good fit. All five of my part-time respondents started out as couriers and subsequently moved to other jobs or job combinations: courier plus administration clerk, dispatch or telephone clerk. One respondent spent seven years as a courier before taking a full time office position.

Full and part-time office staff reported fairly extensive and diverse involvement in learning and training activities. Several people talked about being self-taught in particular skills but it was more common for employees to teach each other. Respondents talked about developing skills through a hands-on method of learning on the job. This approach is a defining characteristic of survivor CED. Given that A-Way is a flagship of this movement, I wasn't surprised to see peer training surface. Most of the people I talked to felt that it worked well for them, although its success was often dependent on the particular trainer.

A couple of years ago, A-Way employed a management trainee who functioned as a computer tutor. Many employees learned about computers and software from this tutor during the term of her stay. There was a strong thread of comment through the interviews of interest and skill in computers and a desire for more computer training. In addition to in-house courses, several respondents mentioned that A-Way had sponsored them to attend external courses and workshops, whether for management training or broader leadership training. These opportunities had an impact, inspiring some employees to take courses on their own. In fact, A-Way employees were thinking quite consciously about their learning needs. In an employee survey, only eighteen of forty (45%) felt that the company had given them all the training they needed. A substantial 75% wished that the company offered more training opportunities. Thus, in the context of the business, many had retrieved their desire to learn.

Solidarity learning

Respondents were generally positive about their experience with A-Way. They talked about it in terms of happiness, enjoyment and enthusiasm, but most often in terms of "comfort." A-Way is a place in which they felt settled, stable and adjusted - difficult qualities to come by. It is a place where they could be themselves, where they did not have to hide past experiences or current circumstances. Employees stayed because of the people; they stayed for each other. With each other they found solidarity, empathy and an acceptance of difference that is absent in the city at large. "We're all in the same boat," said one, and that creates very strong bonds. At A-Way, amidst the delivery of parcels, some people made lifelong friends.

A-Way employees related to each other as co-workers but also as participants in committee meetings, on the Board and management team. One respondent, for example, talked about gaining a capacity for compromise and consensus building as a result of doing committee work within the business. Employees identified with the business and took pride in it as a collective enterprise. Some learned to see new roles for themselves in the milieu. I am thinking here about the respondent who was motivated by the complexity of the lives around him that he took a series of stress management and psychology courses. Full-time office staff members, in particular, learned to see the business as a whole, beyond their specific job in it. A-Way employees also related to the public. Over the phone and in person, they learned to deal

with customers. A couple of respondents took up roles as public speakers, educating others about "mental illness" and employment on the basis of their insider experience.

As I pointed out earlier, for some employees this led to new forms of political identification. I am thinking of a woman who came to see the social movement context within which A-Way is situated. She learned that survivor businesses have to build political support, to fight for what they have. This knowledge of a broader collectivity was gained in relationships to key survivor leaders and other survivor groups. It was not a structured teaching/learning, but occurred in the context of daily life at A-Way, at annual general meetings and yearly conferences. One or two other respondents were learning to see not just the business but the broader environment in which the business operates: the psychiatric survivor movement and its leaders; bureaucracy and government; funding and social policies.

In spite of these new identifications, and regardless of their location within the business, the employees I interviewed continued to ponder the possibilities of mainstream employment. For example, a couple of respondents recognized the broader labor market as a place of more job and learning opportunities than survivor businesses; by comparison A-Way was "small and limited." One said he/she would leave A-Way if he/she found a mainstream job that was receptive. Another indicated willingness if the job paid enough to enable benefit replacement. However, most respondents were very hesitant to seriously consider a move to a "regular" job. Their feelings ranged from uneasy uncertainty to "dead scared" at the prospect.

A major reason for this was systemic. A-Way employees were highly sensitive to the public's intolerance of "mental patients." They knew that people generally react badly to symptoms/labels and that mainstream workplaces do a very poor job with reasonable accommodation for the disabled. One respondent reported being fired upon revealing his/her psychiatric history and, as a result, felt the need to lie about it to most employers. This individual learned that he/she would not be accepted for who he/she was. Most A-Way employees perceived "regular" workplaces as too stressful. They preferred the "human-ness" of survivor businesses. Thus, their solidarity was the result not just of connections built up within the business but of rejection by people in the "outside" world.

Reshaping the definition of self

In spite of external constraints, A-Way Express employees possessed a sense of future. Not only did they have an active work life, most could see their lives going forward in some way. I understand this as part of the re-visioning of self that these sites can foster, particularly with respect to various authorities that govern people's lives. It is a mark of empowerment. That said, there were interesting if subtle differences amongst the three types of workers on how they viewed their futures.

When asked where they thought they would be in five years, full-time staff visualized themselves at A-Way. They had found their niche, and didn't anticipate becoming bored to the point of leaving. Some had evolved highly effective strategies for expanding not so much the terrain of their jobs as the way that they performed them. I am thinking here of an individual who worked with his/her voice in order to make it authoritative but not intimidating when dealing with people over the phone. And the employee who learned to shift his/her orientation to problems from dread to anticipation - recognizing that it was when problems arise that he/she could use his/her skills to best advantage.

Employees such as these were also the people who had given some thought to other roles they could take up within the
business: providing job skills training, counseling support to employees or doing public relations and education. One person linked their future to that of survivor businesses in general. S/he said: "If A-Way had to move away from courier services, or if it disappeared entirely, I have enough confidence in the concept of survivor businesses and their ability to create possibilities to remain optimistic. I see a piece of work that needs to be done to expand and link survivor businesses."

This kind of confidence was much more fragile in the courier ranks. Couriers, too, felt bonded to a-Way but did not necessarily see themselves there in five years. Nor did they visualize other roles for themselves within the company; only one mentioned the need for more survivor businesses. Instead, people in this group were more likely to say that they took things day by day, that they didn't or couldn't

really think about the future. This is not to say that couriers were without dreams. One thought about being a stage musician, another a hairdresser. Two thought primarily about getting a 'real job,' something permanent that would take them off benefits.

Like their full-time counterparts, part-time office staff visualized being at A-Way in five years. However, only one was encouraged by what he/she perceived as a range of opportunities. Two felt that they were stuck with no upward movement possible; the other was hesitant to move up, fearing his/her inability to cope. As a result of working at A-Way, one respondent had eliminated volunteer work from his/her repertoire: "I know now that I am more capable than that!" Should something happen to the business, his/her first choice for re-employment was another survivor business. "Because I've been at A-Way I have a sense of the survivor community. I know the leaders and they know me. I would go down to OCAB and say 'Here I am, ready to work. What do you have for me?" However, this kind of confidence wasn't widespread. In fact, without too much apparent discomfort and after many years in the business, one respondent speculated on a return to sheltered workshops if A-Way went under.

So, there are transformations but they are difficult and not always complete. Virtually everyone I interviewed at A-Way identified ongoing "mental health problems" as a feature of their lives that limited their employment goals and opportunities both within the company and in mainstream employment. This was framed in a variety of terms: illness; becoming sick; nervousness; anxiety and depression; symptoms; suicidal tendencies and depression; hospitalization. While A-Way identifies as a psychiatric survivor business and has clear links to survivor organizations and politics, the employees that I interviewed did not always contest the medical model of mental illness. They had experienced a break in their lives congruent with that explanation.

Respondents across all groupings were affected by lack of self-confidence. Again, this was expressed in various ways but it boiled down to a sense of personal limitation, often stemming the internalization of previous job "failures." People blamed themselves for those failures and became nervous about their abilities. As one person put it, "I don't feel capable of more than what I'm already doing."

Many of my respondents talked openly about their fear of delivering packages. Several were deeply shy and experienced terror over dealing with customers. Ironically, given the stereotype of the "dangerous mental patient," it was not unusual for couriers to dislike or actively fear subways, especially when crowded. A-Way employees dealt with these feelings every working day, although for some the pressure diminished with time and repetition. Surprisingly, even long-term employees had a strong sense of personal limitation as a constraint on their employment opportunities. "I am too anxious to work in a non-survivor business... I am not capable ... I am not sure how I would manage ... I would need to improve my flexibility and stamina... It would test my belief in myself." So, there was a turning inward, a self-blame, in people's reasons for staying put.

Organizational learning

In 1993, A-Way Express went through a financial and personnel crisis that led to a major shift in leadership. The trouble began when employees unexpectedly discovered discrepancies in the business's financial records. This led to the resignation of the executive director – a social worker. Rudderless, the people who remained committed to the business were the survivor couriers and office staff. Working with Board-appointed interim directors, the employees themselves did what was necessary to get things back on course. Day by day, they actually ran A-Way. It was one of those myth-dissolving situations in which "we can't" ran headlong into "but we are!" It taught this particular group much about their capacities. Rescuing the business turned out to be an exercise in overcoming disbelief in themselves. A good measure of their new confidence was the hiring of a psychiatric survivor as the company's new executive director. For the first time in seven years, control passed from the hands of professional service providers to psychiatric survivors.

By 1999, having weathered this transition and relocated to bigger, brighter new quarters, A-Way was as stable as it had ever been. The company's primary challenge was to evolve a sense of future direction that penetrated all layers of the organization. Should the company expand into other parts of the city? Should it diversify in order to employ more people in different kinds of jobs? Should it remain as it was? These burning questions were actively on the table.

The couriers I interviewed commented very little on the future of the business. Of the three who did, one was most concerned about how A-Way could advance his/her personal future, one wanted more of what A-Way already offered, and one was simply worried about any risk to the business, anticipating how devastated he/she would feel if it disappeared. There were echoes of these sentiments among full and part-time office staff - specifically on the importance of maintaining the status quo. Most employees valued the business for its continuity. The thought of a change of any kind was very threatening to people's personal stability and to the sense of opportunity within the community. As one respondent recognized: "It would be a tragedy if A-way went down. It has eased suffering; it has been a pocket of help, acceptance and the alleviation of poverty."

My respondents, especially those who had been with the business for some time, had a sense of gradual but significant change and expansion in the organization over the years. One respondent noted that seeing people move up in the company contributed to his/her sense of involvement in and commitment to it. At the same time, those who had thought most about expansion (full and part-time office staff) were ambivalent about it. Running an operation the size of A-Way was difficult enough without having to think about more and different. In a competitive market, faced with rapid technological change in information transfer, they worried that expansion would do more harm than good.

Some employees simply liked the courier business but there was also the vulnerability of the workforce to consider as well as the risks to funding that might sharpen if A-Way became "too successful." Underlying these concerns was the fact that the business felt good ("pretty cozy") to its employees. Employees were unwilling to unsettle that experience at the same time that they felt pressured by internal and external constraints to offer more people more opportunities. The one area in which expansion seemed reasonable was computerization. Almost everyone agreed that the business should buy more computer equipment and increase training opportunities for employees who wanted to learn how to use it. However, this would require funding and the business lacked resources to hire another tutor.

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY

In this section I construct a narrative account of one woman's learning at A-Way Express. The woman is Laurie Hall.[4] Over nine years she moved from courier to executive director of the business in a journey that evokes the richness and complexity of informal learning in this context.

Opening epiphany

Hospitalized at just 18 years old, Laurie Hall spent six months as an in-patient in a psychiatric hospital followed by six months living on the streets of Toronto. She had been trained as a veterinarian assistant but was advised by doctor and her therapist not to work. After leaving several jobs that just didn't work out, Laurie made her first entry into A-Way Express. The environment afforded her much relief but she was, in her own words "still way too far gone. I had taken too much medication. There was too much other shit going on in my life."

After a couple of months working as a courier, Laurie overdosed, was hospitalized, released, re-hospitalized, and re-released -- at which point she found herself at the bottom of her life. "I weighted 98 pounds. Although I didn't know it, I was anemic. All this shit had happened. I was very depressed. No job, my friend was gone, I couldn't eat. There was nothing to live for." Rescued from another suicide attempt by a nosey landlady Laurie was taken to hospital. It was during this stay that she reached a turning point in her life and opened the door to everything that she has since become.

> During that stay in the hospital, all of the sudden I asked myself, "why the hell am I coming here?"
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> "You know," I told the doctor, "I'm going home, there's no point in my being here."
>
> I remember a couple of days later walking around the ward, and it was so clear to me that I

was saying good-bye.

"I won't be back here," I thought. "And I haven't. So much time had been spent being angry and frustrated at not being able to find the answers. For years I went there thinking 'there has to be some help, there have to be some answers somewhere, someone has to know how to fix this.' But nobody knows. There is no answer, and there is no medication that can fix it. There was a sadness to realize that a solution never could be found there. On the other hand, it was a relief, a freeing feeling. Taking back that control meant all of the sudden there was something I could do about it. There was some place else to look. It was upon leaving the hospital that I decided to go back to A-Way Courier Service.

A big barrier to Laurie's success in her previous jobs was feeling ashamed of her mental health problems and hiding them from her co-workers. Even in the summer heat, she wore long sleeves to cover the scars on her arms. She worried about how to get enough time off to see her doctor and how to conceal a large bag of prescription medications. The first thing Laurie learned at A-Way was the relief and power of not having to lie or hide that part of her life. She learned that it was okay to talk about it.

I didn't have to hide the scars on my arms. I didn't have to come up with stories about where they came from. It was such a relief not having to lie about that part, and to not hide having gotten up feeling wiped out from my medication. People understood if I hadn't slept all night. It was important to be able to call and say "I don't think I can do it today," and not have to pretend that I had the flu or something. I knew that there didn't have to be that energy of hiding where I'd been or of concealing whatever marks might be on me: visible or invisible. Part of coming to A-Way involves deconstructing that. A-Way takes everything and turns everything upside down. I often think about finding myself as a leader now because I've had all of those experiences.

Thus, what was previously a source of shame became a valued resource.

I'd like to learn that, you know?

Back for a second time, Laurie was now ready for A-Way Express. The walking that she did as a courier helped her regain her physical strength. It wasn't a dead-end job for her primarily because there were job openings in the office. She saw those positions as an opportunity to try new things and to progress at her own speed. All it required was the decision to voice her willingness to learn new things.

Early on during my time there we had two telephone people, and one went away on holiday for a few weeks. The other one got sick one day. A couple of times I came in after couriering for the day and saw the manager at the phones where he'd been when I'd left in the morning.

"This is bad for the manager," I thought. "He has to run the phones all day long because both people are away."

I remember thinking to myself, "Gee I should say, 'you know, if you'd like some help with that, I'd love to learn'."

I left the office, came back and said to myself "okay, just swallow and say it."

I looked at the manager and said, " well, I'd like to learn that, you know, if you'd like some help while the regular phone people are off."

"Okay, let's try it tomorrow," he replied.

From delivering packages and answering phones, Laurie gradually made her way into other positions and roles in the company. Her movement was not predictable or structured by the organization as it might have been in a formal training program. Rather, it depended on her alertness to openings that appeared when other employees left or became ill, or when there was a shift in the business itself.

Laurie learned to take advantage of these openings, positioning herself to undertake new, different and more complex kinds of learning.

> I worked as a courier for about six months. When I started filling in with the phones I was still couriering. When the two phone people came back, I filled in for the administrative assistant who was away sick. Basically I was doing the banking and that sort of thing. It was supposed to be in the interim until she returned. I added a lot of stuff to that job. At the time we were getting in some computer systems so I started to learn about computers. I started doing things like typing minutes from meetings, and other tasks that hadn't been part of that job before. When the marketing manager left I was hired to replace him, although I knew very little about marketing. But there wasn't really anyone else to come into that position and I wanted to attempt it. Then when the business manager left, I applied and was moved into that position.

Laurie's next opportunity came when the company's executive director resigned. She played a significant role in discovering financial discrepancies, and confronting management with the problem. The Board appointed interim directors. Over the next year, they did a lot of organizational work to get the business back on track but the day to day management tasks fell to Laurie. It was an exhausting time for her. She was trying to learn the job, as well as keep everything running at the same time.

When the position came open once more, Laurie applied for and got the job as the Executive Director of A-Way. The significance of her appointment was that, for the first time in its history, A-Way Express was run not by professional social workers but by psychiatric survivors themselves.

> At first, I really worried about how it would be for the people I worked with. I put myself in their position and thought about how I would feel if I trained somebody as a courier and now they were my boss. But I haven't had a sense of resentment or discomfort from any of them. We've had a long history of working together. There's a strong sense of respect for each other. What helped me a great deal in becoming executive director was that I worked in the organization for a period of time when I was not part of the leadership. I saw how people reacted to what they felt was the wrong way to do things. I saw where the cliques were. I could just watch and listen from a position where I was not in the spotlight.

In taking up a management role, Laurie was informed by what she referred to as "unconscious knowledge" gained not from books, but from growing up in a family.

> I'm the oldest of five children. We were all very close in age and my parents both worked. I've never actually articulated this before but what I learned from being the oldest, what's inherent in being a leader or being put in a leadership position is that my siblings automatically looked up to me. And as long as I had their respect, things would happen the way I generally wanted them to. It was generating and keeping the respect that was key.

One of Laurie's challenges at A-Way was becoming a leader with and for people who have been damaged by authority -- as she has been herself. She soon learned that there were always a few people who react against authority no matter how it was exercised. But most of what she was faced with was people who, because of the dependency fostered by the mental health system, quickly defer to authority.

> As a manager, I want to make sure that people feel free to agree or disagree with what I say. But I also know that because I'm saying it they're more likely not to say they disagree with it. This is because I am in a position of authority now. It's a very difficult transition. You may have been reactive to authority all those years in the form of your father or the system, but now you're it. It was very hard for me to learn to make decisions and be firm about things. I always played the 45 different sides: "Maybe I'm wrong," or "I shouldn't say this," or "I was sort of thinking," or "Maybe we could do it this way, but we don't have to you know." You don't get respect that way, people won't see you as a leader. It's a challenge to find a balance where you say things clearly, yet at the same time try to be very aware of

where people's reactions stem from. It's getting easier to know what I think and stick with my opinion no matter what.

It's all so subtle

Over several years of practice, Laurie evolved a way of doing her job that worked for the business as a whole. Her approach relied on anticipating distress before it happens.

> The majority of survivors that I have seen are extremely sensitive people. Because it's what helps us survive, we are very perceptive about other people's behaviors. Like an abused child, you learn to predict when there's distress coming so you can get the hell away before the explosion happens. In any sort of leadership position, but particularly in the survivor businesses, you have to be very aware of where other people are at, and very sensitive to where they're coming from. It's about self-esteem and also shyness. Some people will speak and let you know loud and clear what they think; the majority won't.

Laurie's practices included:

- using membership and team meetings to communicate background information

  The biggest thing here is just giving people information. It's difficult at a Board level. The push-pull in that setting is that you only have a two-hour Board meeting in which to try to make decisions and get business done. Are you going to spend the first hour giving background, and then finally say "okay vote on blah, blah, blah"? We're now trying to do more of the background explanations at the membership meetings and the management team meetings. There we have a little more time and the agenda is slightly less tight.

- spending time with employee board members before board meetings

  This is a member-run organization; it does have democratic assumptions and processes built in. It also requires leadership. Sometimes the employee members on the Board aren't as experienced or maybe don't have some of the background knowledge that the outside members on the Board do. I remember that feeling when I sat on my first Board. I thought I'd never know what the other members were talking about. In my role now, I try to spend time with people before each Board meeting, although it's not always possible. I do that as much as I can, but quite frankly it doesn't always happen. And quite frankly it's not equal.

- reading feedback through body language

  It's all so subtle. I can sit on the management team and say what I think about something, and I can generally judge reactions around the table by who's sitting back, sighing, looking away - it's the subtle little things. You have to pay a lot of attention to body language because that's where you're going to get a lot of feedback.

- staying connected to her workforce and key employees

  Working with the same people for a long period of time has helped me know how to deal with each employee as an individual. For example, I know here who will feel free to say bluntly, "I don't agree" or "I think this way." I also know who to talk to afterwards and ask "what did you really think about that?" They're the ones who will not say their true opinion in a group. Sometimes there are those I know I should go and talk to beforehand, to say "this is what I'm thinking about." You can usually feel little pockets of debate and dissention when they begin to brew, being sensitive to this helps.

- consulting with key employees on problematic decisions.

> At A-Way it depends so much on the individuals involved. There are a couple of people who will not like any decision that involves change. Period. When that happens, as long as I know what it's about, I just let it go. I can't make it better, so there is nothing I can do. Yet there's another person I know of. If he has a problem with a decision, then there's a serious problem, because I trust his sense of things implicitly. He's also a person who will never initially say he disagrees with a decision. He's the person that if I sense any body language from, I know I need to talk to him immediately afterwards because I know that there's probably a big problem with the decision.

Revealing as they are, these practices do not capture the way of being that Laurie has learned at and for A-Way Express on a daily basis. That involves sensing the collective mood, or pulse of the place. It is feeling work that means staying alert to the ebb and flow of laughter, jokes, conversation and silence. Do the couriers come in and hang around interacting with dispatch? Do they hang out in the kitchen, eating, talking politics, recounting the plot of ER, and teasing each other? If the answer is no, if they quietly come in and go home, chances are that something has happened to undermine their sense of A-Way as a safe place. The ramifications are enormous.

Psychiatric survivors have been taught that their moods are medically-based. When the anxiety level in the workplace rises – for whatever reason – their first thought is to presume that "it must be me." Typical responses are to withdraw by reducing work hours, to voluntarily increase medications and/or to make a doctor's appointment. These individual actions then rebound back onto the business, increasing the initial tension and so the cycle goes. Understanding this, Laurie argues that leadership means knowing how to change the anxiety level. She learned to consciously boost the mood in the workplace by socializing with fellow employees, and to normalize tensions by explicitly talking about them. (There are, afterall, rational reasons for moods.) That way, the workers are less likely to blame themselves for shifts in feeling and morale. The risk here for anyone in a leadership role is exhaustion from the effort of constantly holding collective feelings and creating a sense of emotional safety and normalcy. Obviously, leadership demands high sensitivity and social strength.

Learning psychiatric survivor politics

At A-Way Express Laurie met other people who were frustrated with the mental health system. "It blew me away," she recalled, "because I'd never heard that before. It was a huge relief, since I had also concluded that the system had no answers." As executive director, Laurie met even more like-minded people – both survivors and allied professionals. The relationships she formed, formal and informal, profoundly influenced her development not just as a manager but as a political activist. It all started with her accidental attendance at a psychiatric survivor conference that was sponsored by OCAB (then the Consumer/Survivor Business Council). Interestingly, what her account of this transition makes visible is the serendipity with which this connection was made, and how shaky she felt in the beginning.

> I went to the conference at the last minute as a replacement for someone who backed out. The worst part was that it meant staying three days in student residence. I'd go up to my room and it was like this little cell with cement block walls and a little cot. It was like being in seclusion back in the hospital. The first night was horrid. I was having nightmares and flashbacks from the hospital. I'd never been to a survivor conference before and I wasn't really sure what this Business Council was. I didn't understand a lot of the conference. There were a lot of politics going on and that was very confusing. Several people had talked to me before we went about running for the Board.
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> "Well," I thought, "it's nice of you to ask, but I don't really know what they do."
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> I was busy with other parts of my life and felt that I didn't have the time. Mostly I felt like I wouldn't know what was going on. What would I do anyway? People approached me a few more times at the conference about being on the Board, including Diana Capponi who was then at Fresh Start Cleaning.
>
> "You know," I said to Diana, "I've thought about it, but I don't think I have the time to give it a hundred percent. So I don't want to do it if I can't do it full out."

> But then I ended up being nominated from the floor, so I accepted. "Oh shit," I thought.
>
> I went away saying "No, no, no," and came back as a member of the Board for the new Business Council.

Laurie subsequently served five years with OCAB, the last two as President. During that time she came into her own as a leader of the survivor movement. Being involved in a provincial organization more than doubled the volume and complexity of her workload. "I often have six calls about OCAB-related things in a day," she recounted. "Yet I'm still trying to run A-Way on 40 hours plus. In spite of this, Laurie remained deeply connected to this broader, educative and political work.

> When the time comes to leave A-Way, I can't see myself also walking away from something like OCAB. I think I can still up keep up that volunteer commitment. In fact it may be easier, because I won't be trying to squeeze in an hour out of everything else that I have to carry here in my current job.

Learning the big picture

During its two years of crisis and change, A-Way Express became so isolated that its community connections had to be almost completely rebuilt. Laurie discovered that a major part of her role as executive director was to link the business with the world. Although A-Way was paying her salary, she found that her work was primarily dealing with things outside of the organization.

> I remember people used to complain about the previous director being out of the office all the time; they were very resentful of his absence. I remember feeling the same way. But we had no idea where he was and what he was doing. We didn't understand why A-Way was paying a person who seemed to never be there. When I became the executive director, I realized that a big part of my job was to be out there in the community. For me, the challenge was about how to make people within A-Way understand why I was often gone. I started giving people information because I felt so guilty about being out of the office so much. I didn't want them to think, "oh great, we've hired somebody else who now thinks she's too good to be here." I still worry about that. Every time I go away, at least a few people say, "oh are you getting excited to go away?" I know by now that I'm going away for three hard days of work, but people's first impression is that I get to go somewhere for free. Ironically, I'd love to be here at A-Way instead, to have time to get a handle on things within the place.

One of Laurie's biggest lessons is that that you can't run a business such as A-Way Express without understanding and influencing the systems with which it interacts. Now, when the business brings on new leadership, the key training piece is not explaining how to do the books or how to run a business. It's explaining the larger context. The best method is one on one mentoring.

> We try to give people as much background information as we can so that they can see the links between things more clearly. Not just explaining what something is, but also why we're doing various things. "Yes, I'm going to Queen's Park, but this is what I'm doing, this is what we're working on." Especially in the years since Mike Harris and the Conservatives came into office, a lot what's happening has a direct impact on A-Way employees.
>
> For example, right now we are working with the Ministry of Community and Social Services on the new Family Benefit Assistance forms. We had a staff meeting where I was able to say "look, these are the changes the government is thinking about making. You guys have all had to go through the process of applying for FBA - tell me what you want the officials to know; tell me what are the major things that have an impact on your life, things that make FBA necessary for you. Tell me what those are so we can push for them."

Seeing more of the big picture is a slow process but Laurie observed A-Way employees growing into it. Some employees didn't care; some never would. But others were finally coming to understand the links.

"It's a whole other step in taking back control of your life," Laurie pointed out. "It's a whole set of inter-related things. All of a sudden you see that you have a role, you could possibly influence legislation, you can write a knowledgeable letter of response to an issue."

Future challenges: Stepping out

Over the years, Laurie has come into a solid understanding of her own skills. She has dealt with multiple governmental bureaucracies, mental health professionals, psychiatric survivor organizations and a full range of customers for A-Way's services. When the business moved to bigger quarters she dealt with real estate dealers, lawyers and architects. She has grown pretty comfortable with these sorts of interactions. "I'm very practical," she pointed out. "I'm good with hands-on structures, which in the past two years is what A-Way desperately needed." With things more in place, Laurie identified another couple of years worth of work that would be needed to stabilize the organization. Specifically, she hoped that its charitable status application for Accent on Ability, an affiliated organization, would be accepted. That would open new doors to fundraising and alternative funding sources.

At the same time, Laurie contemplated making a big change in her work life. "I strongly believe," she stated, "that the role of an executive director is to stay with an organization for only as long as the person is able to bring useful skills to it. I don't think a director should stay for 15 years. They need to move on." While acknowledging the importance of her work at A-Way, Laurie confessed that she could not do the job forever. "I would self-destruct," she said, laughing. "Walking away from A-Way may involve me trying to start something new. I don't know what that will look like yet."

Laurie's growing need to move on highlights an area of ongoing struggle in the life of the business and the survivor movement more generally, namely, leadership development. Nearly a decade of learning on the job has taught her that creating survivor leaders is a long, slow process.

> That's why we all feel so panicked about being spread so thin within the organization. It feels like we don't have time to focus on developing the skills of the next group of people to take over. But maybe we are still doing it in certain ways. We don't always recognize leadership development when it's happening day to day. But the mentoring is taking place.

If the prospect of her departure poses leadership dilemmas for A-Way, the big question for Laurie personally is one of identity. Entering the business as a "worthless mental patient," she recreated herself as the executive director of a respected community organization. Who will she be once she leaves? A-Way valued Laurie for her experience of the psychiatric system; it was the context in which she used and expanded upon that knowledge. What will happen once she leaves for terrain in which other very different kinds of knowledge are dominant? It's a dilemma Laurie has pondered long and hard.

> It's hard to walk between worlds. When I met my partner, Marj, my social life started to expand outside the survivor community. It's almost like living a double life, and I still struggle with that a lot. There are things in the survivor context that give me - for lack of a better word - qualifications to be a leader. I can tell stories that people will think are funny; they will understand what I mean. When I go home at night or when I go out with friends outside of the survivor circle, I find that my situation changes. The personal experiences of being a psychiatric survivor that qualify me in my work world, just don't transfer easily into the outside world. In some ways, they still put me on the bottom of the heap, for lack of a better word.
>
> The whole sense of stigma comes back to slap me right in the face. In a meeting at the church, I can't joke about Queen Street times. There's immediately a stigma attached, even if it's very subtle. And that will probably always be there. I feel it in settings like the District Health Council too. I sat at the District Health Council for quite some time and a lot of the people around the table were Executive Directors. As far as the Ministry of Health is concerned (or Revenue Canada or other community organizations), my role and responsibilities cover exactly the same ground as any other Executive Director. But, they're the service providers at the table and I'm the survivor. With all those imbalances that are still built in through most people's eyes. I find it very confusing.

Afterword

Since I began this monograph, Laurie Hall resigned from the OCAB board and from her position as executive director of A-Way Express Couriers. As I write these words, she is making the transition from work that has consumed her life for the past decade into new phase of her life, personally and professionally. Once again living on her own, Laurie has started a computer service business, building on skills she acquired at night school (community college). Once her orientation of A-Way's new executive director is complete, she will also take on a role with OCAB orienting regional mental health task forces across Ontario to employment options for psychiatric survivors. Her challenge is to replace the financial base and the structure that A-Way provided in her life with new rhythms, responsibilities, activities and colleagues. It won't be easy. But this time, as she heads into a new learning curve, Laurie Hall is starting from a very different place.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this document is actually the beginning of more process for the social learning research team. Along with similar material from Chic Resto Pop in Montreal, and the Homeworkers' Association in Toronto, a shorter version of this case study will be incorporated into our second joint monograph. Issues raised by "Learning to Walk Between Worlds" will be discussed in conjunction with these other research sites in the context of a theoretical framework that values learning in social action.

ENDNOTES

1. As such, I tend to be invisible to (and feel isolated from) academic structures such as NALL. I was present at the Network's inaugural meeting at my own insistence – an impertinence that stemmed from my growing realization of the centrality of learning to community economic development. I looked to NALL for a collegial milieu in which to think and talk about the learning practices and relations characteristic of psychiatric survivors in "alternative businesses." Becoming a member was a strategic attempt to link research based in this marginalized community with an academic network, and to enter these particular partners into debates about informal learning.

2. OCAB is a psychiatric survivor-run organization that provides hands-on assistance to survivor groups wanting to create and operate collective businesses.

3. My respondents represented 110 years of experience with A-Way Express. Five had ten years of experience or more; six had from four to nine years; and four had from one to three years. The five full-timers had been with A-Way an average of 9.5 years; the part-timers had been there average of 7.5; the couriers had been there an average of 4.5. In other words, the most senior employees that I interviewed were in the management ranks while the newest employees are couriers. Full and part-time staff members had university and college education in their backgrounds. Their training ranged over education, fine arts, arts and science, electronics, library technology, physical education and equestrian studies. In most cases, though, it was interrupted by illness, a deep and significant break in the life course. Unemployment tended to follow this crisis with or without placement in back to work type programs. Employees who worked full or part-time came to the company from a variety of often short-term jobs: hospital volunteer, hospital orderly, bookstore manager, parking ticket officer, parking lot attendant, factory worker, office cleaner. One person had worked in sheltered workshops. By contrast, none of the couriers I interviewed had university or college background. Their work histories were more typically blue collar in jobs such as packing and shipping, security guard, factory worker, carpenter's apprentice, and taxi driver. One person registered new businesses for a corporate law firm and delivered securities for a bank. Courier respondents had worked full time in the past but their work lives too broke down into temporary jobs, unemployment insurance, welfare and the shelter system. Four of the full-timers I interviewed had occupied their current positions since their arrival. In several cases, this meant for ten to twelve years. The same was true of the couriers. All five started and had remained couriers, in this case for several years. Given the previous pattern of uncertainty in employment, this shift must be recognized as a real achievement. I had already noticed the emergence of stability in the lives of people who are vulnerable to crisis. My comment from 1995 continued to apply: "The fact that

there was 'no change' over two years for a number of people is not a boring occurrence. Rather, it announces the success of these businesses in creating stability for people more familiar with unsettling change" (Church and Creal, 1995.

4. I have made no attempt here at anonymity for Laurie; there are no confidentiality protections at work in this account. I have worked the text through with her several times, making whatever modifications were possible for some protection. A-Way Express is the only survivor-run courier company company in Canada. As its executive director for so long, Laurie is readily identifiable. Indeed, her role there, along with her story, was recently profiled in a National Film Board production called Working Like Crazy. I gratefully acknowledge her courage, her generosity and her commitment to knowledge building.

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